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Describing the Descriptive: A Rhetorical Mode in 1800s American Music

Rhetoric was a dominant force in nineteenth-century American life, and its ubiquity made it well-known throughout the culture. William N. Denman writes that "the history of rhetoric makes clear that the teaching of rhetoric was an instrumental part of the development of that civic persona" so crucial to American life (3). Towards the middle of the century, "rhetoric had come to be more or less synonymous with composition," showing that any American institutionally-taught how to write had a handle on its concepts (Halloran 5). Further, Nan Johnson claims that "the nineteenth century was the last era during which the discipline of rhetoric exerted an acknowledged authority over the philosophical investigation of discourse and formal instruction in oral and written communication" (3). As such, Americans would be familiar with the four modes of discourse that comprised rhetorical: "description, narration, exposition, and argumentation" (Johnson 177). The prevalence of the concepts created a cultural vocabulary. The term *descriptive* bled from the discourse of rhetoric over into the world of sheet music, where it took on its own life as a genre of songs. It designated songs that utilize such traits as imitation, full characterization, and objective reporting. In doing so, the term *descriptive* acquired stylistic similarities to the contemporary American literary movement of realism. The term then appears back in recitation books to signal works by realist authors, navigating the marketplace war between the dominant romantic movement and the emerging realist.

Description, as a mode of rhetoric, concerns itself with "an account of physical surroundings" while attempting to "appeal to the senses" (Ferganchick-Neufang 181). Nan Johnson details the arrangement of a descriptive composition:

> The introduction identifies an object and defines a particular theme that characterizes the nature of the object as a whole; the development "fills in" that characterization by presenting detail after detail that result in a complete view of the object, which is stated (or restated) in the conclusion or concluding statement. (184-185)

Description, at heart, comprised such works as "travel literature, geographic tracts," and writing in scientific fields such as "anatomy, zoology, and botany" (Johnson 202). She further identifies "the range that nineteenth-century rhetoricians usually assigned to description," and they applied the term to authors from Shakespeare to Milton to Dickens to Henry James (205). She concludes that description became "a broad genre comprehending fiction, drama, and poetry, travel literature, history, scientific treatises, and a host of commonplace informative documents" (205).

As a genre term, *descriptive* appears frequently in recitation books from the time. Recitation collections such as *The Columbian Reader*, *The Art of Reading*, *The United States Speaker*, *De Witt's Superior School Speaker*, *Select Readings and Recitations for Young People,* and *The Modern Elocutionist* list "descriptive recitations" as a genre in their title pages and tables of contents. One collection, *Young People's Speaker*, compiles over 140 pages of them; the section labeled "Descriptive Recitations" takes up over half the book (Northrop iii). The selections cover a range of authors from Sir Walter Scott to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow to Charles Dickens. The middle of the nineteenth century saw the teaching of rhetoric and of composition linked together, and this

ensured the American public had the vocabulary and ability to recognize the traits that allowed such categorization of these authors.

The Dickens selection illustrates the principles of the *descriptive*. Northrop chose a prose excerpt titled "The Wreck" from *David Copperfield*. In it, David comes upon a "schooner from Spain or Portugal, laden with fruit and wine" (Dickens 127). He goes out to see the wreckage, and his first-person narration details every little thing he observes about the rescue efforts, the men stranded on the boat, and how the waves continually crash upon the wreck, capturing new victims. David tries to keep people calm and rational as they rush to the ship's aid, but people's desire to help overpowers him. Ham Peggotty appears and actually makes it to the ship; however, the waves overtake him, and "his generous heart was stilled forever" (Dickens 128). David also discovers the body of his old friend James Steerforth along the shore. The wreck took several acquaintances from David's life in rapid succession, but David does not break his narration to express grief for them. Instead, he presses onward, continuing to report what he witnesses until the selection ends, keeping his account of the shipwreck uncolored by emotion. He will not let the loss of a few friends interfere with his relaying the totality of this catastrophe's details. In fact, something reminds him of Steerforth moments prior, but the memory makes him feel as though he is "going distracted" (Dickens 128). He pushes it out of his mind and returns to telling the events of the wreck and rescue. Dickens, despite constructing a story with multiple deaths in a few scant paragraphs, keeps emotion away from the writing. He dedicates paragraphs to the rolling of "the wild sea," but he spares not a line to have David react to either of the two deaths (Dickens 127). To say that Ham's heart was "generous" marks the closest point to emotion, but all David does is remark upon a character trait (Dickens 128). On finding

Steerforth, David notes that he "saw him lying with his head upon his arm, as [David] had often seen him lie at school" (Dickens 128). David makes no funeral plans. In being so short, the narrative represents the events as they happened. This heightens the piece's accuracy. It does not bog itself down with subplots and foreshadowing of events hundreds of pages yet to come; it presents a simple story with a simple resolution. Every event portrayed remains completely plausible. The narrative takes no flights of fancy into the romantic, remaining entirely grounded in reality.

The account aligns with Johnson's explanation of a descriptive composition. Dickens devotes no time to the interior thoughts and feelings of David. Instead, he uses David as a recorder to recount exactly what he saw, not what he experienced. John Genung, one of the older rhetoricians from whom Johnson draws, expresses that the *descriptive* may come across in "a matter-of-fact way," and the casual apathy with which David details the deaths of his friends shows that perfectly (484). In its arrangement, Johnson's prescriptive design for a descriptive composition works well. Dickens immediately introduces the object (the ship) to the reader, and David recounts his observations to make the totality of it clearer. The only fault between the two is that the ending does not return the reader to the initial object; however, this can be excused, given its nature as a selection from a larger work as opposed to a piece meant to stand alone.

The public's familiarity with rhetoric led to usage of the term *descriptive* in the world of sheet music. A music catalogue published for the S. Brainard's Sons Company in 1892 lists a wide variety of songs as being *descriptive*. On page three, it advertises a song by B.F. Rix titled "Johnny Schmoker," and it pitches it as "an amusing, descriptive chorus, which is very popular as a concert or exhibition piece. It is entertaining,

introducing imitations of the drum, fife, triangle, bag-pipe, trambone [*sic*], &c." Similarly, on page eighteen, the catalogue discusses Henry Clay Work's "Crossing the Grand Sierras," referring to it as a "descriptive piece; a solo with the other voices accompanying in imitation of railroad train; duet with chorus." On page twelve, Fred R. Root's "Beyond" gets an intriguing mention. The advertisement for it pitches the song in character, telling the consumer that "you see, sir; poor Mary, when her little Benny was drownded, her wits went out like, and she spent most of her days a talking to the waters; and one day we found the poor girl drownded, sir, drownded! She had gone to her boy *Beyond*. A grand descriptive song by Fred. R. Root on this incident. Very effective and popular." The catalogue additionally names two songs about the Civil War as being *descriptive*, both the works of George F. Root. Page thirteen states that his song "Who'll save the Left" was "written during the war, and is descriptive of a battle scene. It is by Geo. F. Root, and can be sung with great effect." Further down the page, the catalogue has "Within the sound of the enemy's guns" advertised as "another of Geo. F. Root's celebrated descriptive war songs. Very effective, if well-sung." On page 142, advertisements refer to Felix McGlennon's "That is Love" as being "the great descriptive emotional popular song of the day. All the minstrels are singing it." Page 121 refers to Michael Watson's "Anchored (English Song)" by stating "the story of a voyage and shipwreck are here set forth with considerable ability. The song is elaborate, and somewhat descriptive in its character — especially the strain in C-minor and the finale. The accompaniment is also interesting and effective. Altogether an excellent serious song."

Advertisements on the back of sheet music itself also use *descriptive* in pitching their songs to prospective buyers. "If," an 1899 song by Raymond A. Browne and

William H. Penn carries a few such advertisements. On its back, advertisements for two songs by Gene Jefferson and Bob Irving use the term. The first, "I Haven't Changed My Mind Since Then," says that it is a "beautiful descriptive song, that is free from the objectionable features of improbability and vulgarity. Tells a clean, wholesome story, and its pretty verses are wedded to an equally pretty melody. Just the thing for your act, if you ever use descriptive songs." Twice in three lines, the copywriter uses the word *descriptive* to represent the song to the person reading the advertisements. In saying that the song lacks "improbability," the artist can rest assured knowing that the events portrayed in the piece reside purely within the plausible, one of the hallmarks of the realist literary movement. In saying that the song provides no "vulgarity," one could quickly assume that the song respects the time's standards of taste; in doing so, however, one assumes a more modern definition of "vulgarity" and ignores that the copywriter could be indicating that the piece contains nothing ordinary or common. The likelihood of "vulgarity" referring more to the area of taste than to commonality, however, becomes greater when placed in the context of the next line which states the story to be "clean" and "wholesome." Given this intratextual evidence, one can safely presume that the copywriter meant that the song would not offend anyone's sensibilities. Closing the advertisement by tacking on a conditional clause, "if you ever use descriptive songs," the copywriter reveals that the performers have a choice of material concerning the *descriptive* nature of their work. The second, "I'd Like to Hear That Song Again," makes the following claim:

> Another great descriptive song. Without a doubt the most original of its class. Introducing a positively new story in song and effectively bringing in the melody of 'My Old Kentucky Home.' A flawless song that you can depend on for solid

encores. You take no chances when you sing this one.

Tying this piece into the artist's need for success, the copywriter claims it makes "for solid encores" and that the artist will "take no chances." Here, one sees that the *descriptive* song can please an audience and meet its expectations for entertainment.

"I'd Like to Hear That Song Again" has a reputation as a *descriptive* and crowd-pleasing song, and this warrants a closer examination of its contents. "I'd Like to Hear That Song Again" tells the tale of an old "darkey," to use its words, on the verge of dying far away from his homelands of Kentucky. A nurse attends to the man, and someone nearby begins to sing "My Old Kentucky Home." This evokes a response in the man, hearing his state song so close to his death. This leads to the chorus as well as the title, as the man tells those around him that he would "like to hear that song again, 'My Old Kentucky Home,' / For [he] was born in ole Kentuck', dar's whar [he] used to roam!" Though the man speaks up throughout the song, only here does he break into any semblance of dialect. Jefferson wrote his other lines in standard English, lines like "I'd like to ask one favor—'twould drive away my pain, / Please, Miss, go ask the singer to sing that song again." Near the close of the chorus, the song utilizes the melody as well as the words of "My Old Kentucky Home." This song demonstrates the imitation, full characterization, and objectivity of *descriptive* songs.

Imitation appears as a common trait of *descriptive* songs. "I'd Like to Hear That Song Again" contains snippets of "My Old Kentucky Home," and by quoting that song, it imitates what the main character hears at that time and expresses that for the audience. Further, when it utilizes dialect, it does so not to mock or to caricaturize but to provide a more accurate representation of the way the character spoke. "Johnny Schmoker," advertised as *descriptive*, provides a great example. The song, written in German,

consists of little more than the singers using their voices to impersonate musical instruments by singing “Rub, a dub, a dub, das ist mein Drummel” and similar verses to cover an entire band. A paragraph in English precedes the song. It gives explicit instructions to the performers on how to gesture as though playing the instruments throughout the work, similar to gesture guidelines found in recitation manuals. It indicates for the singers to “observe, that the motions are made only when the words describing the instruments are sung, as for example, at ‘Rub a dub a dub’, the roll of the drum, is imitated” such that they pair the visual imitation with the aural imitation. “Crossing the Grand Sierras,” also advertised as *descriptive*, uses the imitation of a train to better represent the experience of travel to its listeners. Eduard Holst’s “Battle of Manila” breaks down into various sections such as “Dewey Approaching the Enemy,” “Prayer Before the Battle,” and “Groans of the Wounded.” At the section breaks, Holst changes keys, tempos, and time signatures to better portray the subject at hand. The prayer, slow and written in C-major, abruptly changes to an exciting 2/4 time that livens up the start of the attack. As the battle draws to a close and the wailing of the wounded fills the air, the music itself slows back down and changes to a 6/8 time to reflect the voices crying out. These imitations appeal to the senses, hence the borrowing of the rhetorical *descriptive* to label them. They attempt to provide the audience with an audio actuality that approximates the experience, be it of hearing a song or instrument to traveling across the country to fighting on the battlefield.

Full characterization in *descriptive* songs presents their characters as fleshed-out people in place of stereotypical caricatures. This quality distinguishes them from contemporary songs, even if they share the same author. “I’d Like to Hear That Song Again” portrays issues of race with gravity and grace. The song makes no mockery of the

old man's death; people tend to him as he makes his exit from the mortal stage, and they acquiesce to his request for repeating the song that makes him so long for home. The song relays the events of its story in a plausible manner; nothing outrageous happens. This puts the song in contrast with a contemporary work by Gene Jefferson and Leo Friedman, "Coon! Coon! Coon!" The top of the sheet music's cover claims the song as "The Most Successful Song Hit of 1901," and its cover (and title) relates its genre. Three identical caricatures of an African-American man's face, top hats askew and bowties oversized, run in a diagonal line from the upper-left corner of the cover down to the lower-right. Their wide, staring eyes provide the many Os the song's title requires. These many markers identify it as being a "coon song" (Dorman 1). Thematically, the chorus expresses how much the singer would "rather be a white man / Instead of bein' a coon." The lyrics tell the tale of a lover spurned because of the color of his skin. To remedy the situation, he attempts to pass as white by getting his "face enameled," his "hair made straight," and going to see her "dressed up like a white man." As he travels to see his love, he passes by two doves that see through his ruse and call him out as a "coon," a joke about the aural similarities between the pejorative term and a dove's cry. "Coon" takes a completely different route in its depiction of race, despite having the same lyricist. While "I'd" portrays its African-American character without judgment, "Coon" takes every opportunity to mock him. It does not attempt a serious and dramatic portrayal of an effort to pass and cross racial boundaries, a subject upon which authors such as Charles Chesnutt were writing on at that time; it plays the idea instead for comedy. The events of "I'd" are entirely plausible, while the plot of "Coon" is inherently ridiculous, given that happening upon birds that then unmask him foils his meticulous plan. This full characterization marks the distinction between the *descriptive* song and

the coon song.

Objectivity, an effort to separate truth from emotion, also plays a part in the *descriptive* song. "I'd Like to Hear That Song Again" features no emotional ploys regarding the death of its main character; the narrator simply reports the events of his death on a factual basis. This mirrors the *descriptive* excerpt seen from Dickens, wherein David treats deaths, no matter how close, as simply something to be noted and detailed. Similar objectivity turns up in the Harry Harrison ballad "Stephen's Visit to the Elephant." In the song, the titular farmer finds "the morning was dull and betokened a day / Unsuited to curing and carting of hay." As such, Stephen takes his horse to town, and today happens to be the day the circus arrives. Stephen sees the elephant "with tusks and with trunk," but the encounter proves too much for his horse. The horse, "scared at the sight, or the scent or the sound...turned quickly and shortly around," toppling over Stephen's attached cart of goods and the farmer himself. Stephen cares not about this setback, "for henceforth [he] never can say it of course, / That [he's] not seen the elephant—nor can the horse." The horse, spooked by something far larger than itself, returns home. No fantastical elements pervade this tale; Stephen even handles the potentially usual occurrence of encountering an elephant in the middle of American farmland with subdued acceptance. Three words repeat themselves five times during the song: "and so forth." Appearing at the ends of lines to just trail off from that part of the lyric and move on to the next, as it does in "with a pail of pale butter, eggs, berries (and so forth)," it provides a matter-of-fact attitude reminiscent of the detailing of the wreck in *David Copperfield*. This quality of objective reporting further allows *descriptive* to cross the boundary between a scholastic usage in recitations and rhetoric and a popular usage in sheet music.

At the same time songwriters produced these *descriptive* songs, a literary movement known as realism fought for a place in the American marketplace. The predominant style, romanticism, held sway over the minds of the American reader. Hamilton W. Mabie's article from 1893, "The Most Popular Novels in America," notes the divergence occurring in reading taste, claiming that there are "many reading publics" including one "which reads Shakspeare [*sic*], Dante, and Goethe constantly and intelligently" and another "which reads ephemeral stories" (508). Near the top of his list, one finds such works as *Ivanhoe, The Scarlet Letter, Ben-Hur,* and *Adam Bede* (Mabie 508). Mabie analyzes his results, and he determines that the American reading populace as a whole "prefers Dickens, Thackeray, George Eliot[1], Hawthorne, Mrs. Stowe, and Charlotte Bronté to Mr. Howells, Dr. Holmes, Mr. James, and Mr. Black," demonstrating a market preference for romantic and historical works when compared to the realist works of William Dean Howells and Henry James, both cornerstones of the American realist movement (514). This highlights the way the market would soon shift, as Herbert Edwards claims that "the appetite for actualities which has been the most distinctive characteristic of the American reading public in the twentieth century, was to a certain extent, at least, the result of the long battle waged for realism in American fiction" (248). Writers engaged in a war over minds of the public, and a time of turmoil on all sides emerged and lasted from the middle of the nineteenth century through until its end.

Realism has a few key characteristics upon which scholars agree. The journal *American Literary Realism* noted six definitive traits of the movement: "fidelity to

[1] The juxtaposition of Eliot against the American realists raises questions, given her modern categorization as a realist author; however, her citation comes through the popularity of *Adam Bede*, a historical novel ranked on the list far above her later works such as *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*.

actuality, objectivity (or neutrality—the absence of authorial judgment), democratic focus (particularized, ordinary characters), social awareness (and critical appraisal), reportorial detail, and colloquial expression" ("Mostly Relevant" 74). Nancy Glazener, in a chapter for *A Companion to American Fiction, 1865 – 1914*, lays out the goals of the movement as such:

> The general mission of nineteenth-century realism was, then, to represent faithfully contemporary life and ordinary people (with "ordinary" taken to designate those who are neither very wealthy nor very poor); to depict characters with well-developed inner lives and situate them in thickly described social environments; and to simulate the language and interweavings of circumstance in the social worlds presented, avoiding conventionalized language and plot developments (or at least the conventions associated with the romance and other prior literary forms). (19)

These traits distinguish it from the more popular romanticism, and they serve to produce serious literature for serious people.

The traits of *descriptive* songs do not mirror the use of the term in rhetoric but instead stylistically align with the realist movement. Johnson's detailing of *descriptive* composition accounts for the attempt to "characterize the nature of the object as a whole," but *descriptive* songs go beyond that (184). Glazener here presents the further ideas of both imitation (with her reference to "simulating the language") and objectivity (with the effort to "represent faithfully") that *descriptive* songs employ (19). "Mostly Relevant" even more clearly illustrates their similarities, going so far as to mention the "colloquial expression" that couples with "reportorial detail" to produce works that utilize dialect for the sake of accuracy rather than mockery (74). As the term moved

away from its origins in rhetorical thought, it took on new meanings to justify its new usage. In doing so, *descriptive* songs gained the traits of realist works but avoided the term. This allowed them to avoid the marketplace controversy taking place between the realist and the romantic.

This conflating of *descriptive* with realism in the music world gets pulled back into recitation books of the early 1900s, where editors apply the *descriptive* label to works by realist authors. *The New Century Speaker, Writer and Etiquette,* compiled by T. Edward Hollinshed in 1901, features a category of recitations termed "Descriptive, Emotional and Dramatic" (2). This catch-all contains many titles featuring laborers and their family, such as "The Miner's Protege [*sic*]" and "The Fisherman's Wife," showing the democratic focus desired by the movement (2). Another title warns the reader that "You Will Never Make It Pay!" (2). Under this category, Hollinshed places a poem by Howells, "The Pilot's Story." Hollinshed fails to elaborate on which of the three terms he associates with Howell's poem; however, the simple proximity of the term to one of the staunchest advocates of American literary realism reveals a potential link. Delbert Gross Cooke's book, *William Dean Howells: A Critical Study*, further clarifies this connection. In reference to "The Pilot's Story," he claims that "in the descriptive interlude and conclusion, the master has his inning" (Cooke 120-121). Cooke published his study of Howells in 1922, a time when the term *descriptive* was still in use to signal realist works. In identifying specific portions of "The Pilot's Song" as *descriptive*, Cooke shows not only that he knows what the *descriptive* entails but also that Hollinshed correctly sorted it into the *descriptive* genre. A distinct association between Howells's work and *descriptive* exists, and it inextricably links the *descriptive* to the movement of American literary realism.

Howells's "The Pilot's Story" requires a deeper examination, given its status in both realist and *descriptive* spheres. The titular pilot relays the story, recounting to the reader the events from his youth that happened on his boat. A man boards the boat, accompanied by a woman of mixed race who has "just enough / blood from her mother" that others recognize her background (Howells 5-6). The man gambles that night under the gaze of the pilot, who "used to watch / them at monte, / Down in the cabin at night, and learned to /know all of the gamblers" (Howells 17-20). The next day, the man and one of the gamblers confront the lady. The pilot "could not / hear what the words were," but he details the physical aftermath he witnesses (Howells 47-48). He sees that "only the woman started, and looked from one / to the other, / With imploring eyes, bewildered hands, and a / tremor" (Howells 49-52). The voices escalated, and the pilot finally hears the cause of her fear as the man says to her, "Louise, I / have sold you" (Howells 57-58). Through the man's gambling the night before, the ownership of the woman passes from the man to the gambler. The woman shrieks at the man, revealing the true nature of their relationship as she claims he guaranteed her "freedom!— / Promised [her] for the sake of [their] little boy in / Saint Louis!" (Howells 76-78). She did not see herself and the man as master and slave; she saw them as lovers whose devotion cut through such categories. A crowd gathers to watch the spectacle. She runs "straight to the stern of the boat, where the / wheel was" after a short breakdown, and the people follow her (Howells 107-108). At the rear of the boat, she finds "not one to save her,—not one of all the com- / passionate people!" (Howells 113-114). She leaps off the boat, "down on the cruel wheel, that caught her, and / hurled her, and crushed her, / And in the foaming water plunged her, and hid / her forever" (Howells 125-128).

In “The Pilot’s Story,” Howells utilizes imitation, full characterization and objective reporting, similar to the *descriptive* songs of the time. A subtle imitation comes through in the terminal lines of the poem. As the paddlewheel on the back of the boat pulls the lady under, the poem enters a rhythmic, cyclical meter. Howells repeats the pattern of “[verb] her” five times in four lines. It beats into the reader just as it beats into the water below. Howells gives the woman a rounded character instead of using a clichéd slave woman caricature. She speaks just as the men do. In refraining from using dialect, Howells portrays the woman in a safe space where she can be read as being of equal intellect to the men, whereas an effort of dialect could lend itself to a pejorative sense unintended by Howells. Under the pilot’s eye, she runs a gamut of emotions, greeting the man with “a smile that was more like a / wife’s than another’s” before the horror of her situation sets in and forces her to resort to suicide (Howells 38-39). This display of emotions, while showing the depth of her character, also reveals the objectivity with which Howells treats the subject matter. At no point does the poem reveal the thoughts or interior emotions of any character; everyone expresses everything externally. This only aids the pilot in telling his story. Early on, Howells establishes the pilot as a watcher when he attends the gambling session, an observer to report action without judgment. Even when prompted for action, the pilot fails to act, as does the rest of the crowd. Everyone nearby simply “waited in si- / lence and horror,” as interference would break the objective distance maintained by the observers (Howells 118-119). Similar to “The Wreck,” the observers greet her death with a muted acceptance. The poem ends immediately after she dies, leaving no time for reflection of the gravity of the events. They happened, and the pilot reported them. He has told his story, nothing more and nothing less.

Through its transformation in the cultural sphere of sheet music, *descriptive* acquires a literary agency to encompass realist works that may otherwise have been ignored by the reading public. Music took the term from rhetoric due to audience familiarity. Its usage there, morphing as it moves from realm to realm, changes to signify songs with traits similar to the realist movement. This euphemistic use integrates itself back into literature to expand the genre. By categorizing works from a variety of authors with existing cultural capital such as Charles Dickens alongside authors the public finds less appealing on their own such as William Dean Howells, editors make realist works more palatable to the consumer. Similar to the wheel in "The Pilot's Story," the cycle of cultural collaboration continues without ceasing, and *descriptive* heads back home, its journey having broadened its horizons to accept a literary movement otherwise underrepresented in the marketplace.

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